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THE GUILTY FEMINIST ARMY

A PODCAST FOR A REFRESHED POLITICS OF FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

IN THIS PAPER, I DISCUSS THE AFFECTIVE POTENTIAL OF LAUGHTER IN THE HUGELY POPULAR COMEDY PODCAST SERIES; THE GUILTY FEMINIST. SPECIFICALLY, I EXPLORE HOW THE SOUNDS OF LAUGHTER – AS DISSEMINATED BY THE PODCAST – CAN LEAD TO EXPLOSIONS OF EMOTION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE; SETTING THE BODY IN MOTION AND LEADING TO NEW WAYS OF THINKING, FEELING AND BEING. WHILE THESE PUBLIC EXPLOSIONS OF EMOTION CAN BE TRANSGRESSIVE, I POSTULATE THAT THEY CAN ALSO RELIEVE SOME OF THE TENSION CREATED BY THE NEGATIVE AFFECTS SWIRLING AROUND FEMINISM, WHICH, ACCORDING TO AHMED, “IS ALWAYS ASSUMED TO BE BRINGING OTHERS DOWN” (AHMED, 2010:65). USING GUATTARI’S IDEAS ON THE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVATION, I ARGUE THAT THESE EXPLOSIONS CAN INTENSIFY THE EMERGENCE OF A GLOBAL, INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST COMMUNITY, PROVOKING A CONSIDERATION OF HOW PODCASTS SUCH AS THE GUILTY FEMINIST COULD EXTEND OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND ONLINE ACTIVISM WITHIN CONTEMPORARY FEMINISMS.

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Introduction

The Guilty Feminist is a comedy podcast that was created by comedians Deborah Frances-White and Sofie Hagen in 2015 which uses humour to discuss topics within and related to feminism. Hagen left in 2017, and Frances-White now co-hosts the show with a variety of high-profile women comedians such as Shappi Khorsandi, Jessica Fostekew and Aisling Bea. Standing out as a podcast success story, it has been downloaded more than 50 million times over the past three years, and nominated for a number of awards¹. Episodes – which last approximately 60 minutes – refer to issues currently being discussed in the media, such as *Repeal the Eighth* (May 2018) and *Period Poverty* (December 2017), or centre on timeless feminist issues, such as *Emotional Labour* (January 2018) and *Language* (November 2017). Each week, the central topic is explored through conversation, stand-up comedy and a panel discussion, which a range of invited guests participate in.

The aim of this paper is to consider how *The Guilty Feminist* might be operating within the so-called fourth wave feminist movement, by offering listeners the opportunity to qualitatively alter their experience of the everyday through laughter. It forms part of a much wider study, in which I argue that the unprecedented numbers of people participating in women-led comedy is a form of contemporary feminist praxis². Here I will argue for the reimagining of podcasts such as *The Guilty Feminist* as a burgeoning form of online activism which has the potential to intensify the emergence of a global, intersectional feminist community. Furthermore, I will argue that the unpleasant intensities of fear connected with online hate, which “have the power to reroute the bodies of women and other others, and to diminish their ability to act, to speak, to challenge, and to engage” (Paasonen et al, 2018:5) are largely sidestepped by podcast listening, which is usually positioned by consumers as an entirely positive experience, aimed at relaxation and enjoyment. This is especially the case with comedy podcasts such as *The Guilty Feminist*, which, I argue, provoke laughter and joy as opposed to fear and shame, opening the body to the world and increasing its capacity to act. Ultimately, I hope to provoke a reconsideration of the importance of podcasts such as *The Guilty Feminist* to the fourth wave feminist movement, thus extending our current understanding of contemporary online activism and the place of laughter within it.

Fourth wave feminisms

The feminist wave narrative, according to which Western feminist history – from the Suffragists to the present day – is divided into four ‘waves’, is a contentious one³. This is partly because it is not able to encompass all of the voices that have contributed to feminism over the years, and partly because the chronological ordering means that whole time periods are lost or glossed over. If you think too hard about any of the waves, they disintegrate rapidly and eddy into one another, the way ocean waves do. However, despite continued criticism, the oceanic metaphor persists, and the idea of a fourth wave has gained traction within recent feminist scholarship (Chamberlaine 2017, Cochrane 2014, Munro 2013, Baumgardner 2011). As pointed out by Chamberlaine, “the surging and forcefulness connoted by the wave speaks to periods of affective intensity” (Chamberlaine, 2017:6), and – as long as we consider feminism as a set of *practices* rather than as a fixed identity or lifestyle – I think it is possible to use the feminist wave metaphor in a way that is useful for considering how affects work within specific historical contexts. As a side note, the conception of affect on which I draw follows the increasingly popular line of thinking from Spinoza through Deleuze and Guattari via Massumi, which describes affect as “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another...implying an augmentation of that body’s capacity to act” (Massumi, 2013:xvi).

Munro defines the fourth wave as a “global community...who use the internet for both discussion and activism” (Munro, 2014 [online]). Social media, blogs and other internet forums have made it possible for feminists to come together, to grapple in new ways with issues around intersectionality, and to open up spaces for voices from diverse backgrounds to debate and discuss key issues. During previous ‘waves’, feminists have often spoken and written about the minutiae of women’s lives, making visible the myriad of painful details that are so often brushed under the carpet or put down to ‘natural’ or ‘biological’ differences. The internet, however, has intensified our ability to move between public and private; a phenomenon that has been particularly evident in the so-called Me Too movement⁴. ‘Me Too’ was initiated over a decade ago by activist Tarana Burke, as a way of supporting young women of colour who had been affected by sexual violence (Burke, 2019 [online]). Starting life as a Brooklyn-based enterprise, it exploded on Facebook and Twitter in 2017 when some celebrities shared their own experiences of abuse, using the now infamous hashtag. In less than 24 hours, 4.7 million people from 85 different countries

had participated online, generating more than 12 million posts, comments and reactions (Santiago & Criss, 2017 [online]). As pointed out by Burke, “communities have to come together to make them safe...to protect the most vulnerable people” (Burke, 2019 [online]), and here we can see the internet facilitating a radical ‘coming-together’ of a community on a global scale.

In *Chaosmosis*, Guattari muses on the affective charges unleashed by images of the student protests at Tiananmen Square (Guattari, 1995:2). These didn’t result in what you might call a traditional revolutionary politics; with demonstrations with specific demands, for instance. Instead, it unleashed what Guattari calls a ‘revolution of feeling’, with people taking part in a multitude of minor rebellions in the way they organised and lived their everyday lives (ibid). Importantly, it was technological developments – namely the television screen – that allowed these affective charges to spread, setting in motion “a whole lifestyle, collective ethic and conception of social relations” (ibid). I think there is an argument to be made that a similar phenomenon is occurring within the fourth wave feminist movement. For example, while Me Too did result in some quantifiable changes – such as the firing of men in high profile positions – what is really at the heart of the movement, according to Burke, is *feeling*:

When two people exchange the words ‘me too’, it is...an exchange of empathy between two people who say ‘I hear you, I see you, and I believe you’...Ultimately...we want to teach people to lean into their joy, and away from their trauma (Burke, 2019 [online]).

The word ‘joy’ might seem out of place in relation to a movement that has been characterised by stories of pain and suffering, but for Masumi, joy is not the same thing as happiness:

Joy is affirmation, an assuming by the body of its potentials, its assuming of a posture that intensifies its powers of existence. The moment of joy is the co-presence of those potentials, in the context of a bodily becoming (Masumi, 2015:44).

Through their use of technology, then, fourth wave feminists are giving rise to waves of feeling/joy, which in turn are augmenting their capacity to act, both as a political body and as individual bodies. While the fourth wave has been criticised for lacking a set of unified goals (Cochrane, 2013:11), perhaps – like Guattari – we should look beyond traditional conceptions of revolutionary politics and place greater value on the unpredictable energies unleashed by grassroots movements, which may – in many small ways – intensify our powers of existence.

The affective qualities of sound

The Guilty Feminist is part of a growing network of feminist comedy podcasts⁵ that are developing a large, international following. However, I can find no examples of feminist podcasts being spoken about in conversations on the fourth wave’s use of technology. This might be because, 15 years after the Apple iPod first hit the market, they remain a relatively niche pursuit (McIntosh, 2017 [online]). However, according to Matt Hill, co-founder of the British Podcast Awards, the strength of podcasting is in its “narrowcasting...creat[ing] audio content for niche groups of people” (McIntosh, 2017 [online]). They can be independently produced and are extremely low-tech, making them ideal for groups (such as women) who are often marginalised by traditional models of ‘gate-kept’ media and production. According to Berry, what podcasting offers is a ‘horizontal’ media form: “producers are consumers and consumers become producers and engage in conversations with each other” (Berry, 2006:146). Moreover, the internet trolls who thrive on abusing women on social media tend to be kept at bay, because listeners only seek podcasts out based on interest. This ability to fly under the radar – and easily and quickly produce – means that the creators of podcasts have a lot of freedom; in addition, podcasts are a useful tool for consciousness-raising and building highly engaged, politicised communities. As Berry puts it; the building blocks are in place for a revolution (ibid).

I will now briefly turn to some of the thinking that has been done by Gallagher, a colleague of mine, on the affective qualities of sound, which builds on understandings of how embodied relations with space may be mediated to produce particular emotional behaviours. As pointed out by Gallagher, Masumi’s theorisation of affect (which I referred to earlier) is useful in relation to sound, because it draws attention to how sound can be understood “as...waves moving matter – a process of bodies being moved, changed, affected” (Gallagher, 2016:43). Gallagher’s work considers how sound creates affective atmos-

pheres which can be conducive to particular psychosomatic states. For instance, he points out that in humans, low frequencies have a tendency to produce queasiness, while oceanic rhythms may have calming affects (ibid). Because *The Guilty Feminist* is recorded in front of a live audience, laughter can be heard throughout each episode, along with applause and a cacophony of other vocalisations, including cheering, booing and screaming. Early episodes were recorded in small studio theatres, but as the podcast has grown in popularity, it has moved into larger and larger venues, recently selling out two nights at the London Palladium. So, when a guest on the show says a line that is funny, it is possible to hear up to 2000 people laughing at it. By paying attention to my own embodied responses to the sounds of *The Guilty Feminist*, I hope to show that it can produce a range of physical intensities. Also, because podcast listeners are in charge of where they are when they listen, I hope to show how these intensities might affect the body in relation to its environment; leading to new ways of thinking, feeling and being.

Guilty feminisms

Each instalment of *The Guilty Feminist* opens with 5-10 minutes of witty repartee, in which Frances-White and her co-host discuss whether they have had a 'guilty' week or a 'feminist' week. These conversations, which are punctuated by one-liner confessions that start with the words 'I'm a feminist but...', serve to highlight the purpose of the podcast, which is a platform for exploring "our noble goals as 21st century feminists and the hypocrisies and insecurities [that] undermine them" (Frances-White, 2017 [online]). For example:

I'm a feminist but...once I went on a feminist march, and I popped into a department store to use the loo, and while I was there I got distracted trying out face cream...when I came out the march was gone (Frances-White, 2017 [online]).

The idea behind *The Guilty Feminist* somehow gets to the heart of my own experience of contemporary feminism, ; described by Brown as "a tortured and guilty grieving" (Brown, 2005:3). While admissions of guilt in the podcast – which have included singing along to Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines*, fat-shaming Disney characters and enjoying articles in *Hello* magazine – seem inconsequential when taken in isolation, together they build up a picture of a feminism that is haunted by the feeling that we 'should know better' and 'do more'. We cannot claim to be naive to our own investment in the construction, reproduction and regulation of sex and gender – as, arguably, previous generations could – but yet, our ability to achieve a change in those social relations that oppress us seems further away than ever. According to Brown, the fourth wave – like many contemporary social movements – exists beyond the hope of revolution, figuring itself as a non-utopian enterprise "with more than a minor attachment to the unhappy present" (Brown, 2005:4).

Of course, Ahmed has written extensively about the interesting relationship between feminism and happiness. She argues that as a result of our refusal to convene around a happiness that is dictated by an inherently misogynistic society, feminists are seen to represent unhappiness and a lack of enjoyment (Ahmed, 2010:65). This kills joy, and in turn, associates feminism with negative affects. By 'negative affects', Ahmed is not referring to negative feelings. On the contrary, for Ahmed, whose theorisation of affect is also rooted in Spinoza, negative affects are those social forces that restrict the body's capacity to act (ibid). Therefore, happiness can actually be read as a negative affect, and unhappiness can be seen as a form of activism – because, as Ahmed argues, feminists do kill joy in a certain sense, by disturbing the fantasy that happiness can be found in the places marked out as 'happy' by society. By pointing out sexism, you are exposing the bad feelings that normally get hidden; "sabotaging the happiness of others" (Ahmed, 2010:66).

Interestingly, the confessions on *The Guilty Feminist* are often to do with happiness. In the example at the beginning of this section, Frances-White owns up to enjoying a department store *too much*, directing her energies into face creams rather than the feminist march that is going on outside. Her guilt comes from not being unhappy enough. However – as I will now explore – the comic nature of the podcast invites listeners to take a new affective position in relation to contemporary politics. We *should* be unhappy with the current state of affairs: with the economic inequalities that are increasing year by year, the effects of environmental deterioration that are already being felt, and the mass displacement of people in conflicts all over the world. However, it should be an 'active' unhappiness, fuelled by Burke's notion of feminist joy (Burke, 2019 [online]).

Perhaps the most well-known and well-cited theorist of comedy is Bakhtin, who presents comedy "as a world of topsy-turvy,

of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled" (Stallybrass & White, 1986:8). In *The Guilty Feminist*, the co-hosts, guests and live audience participate in the creation of a world where social norms are suspended. They make spectacles of themselves (in the sense put forward by Rowe in *The Unruly Woman*); a fact acknowledged by Frances-White, who explains that "people don't just come on this show [to] do their set... they're coming on to reveal things about themselves they never normally would" (Frances-White [online]). Here I want to offer another example, this time taken from the middle of episode 61; *Orgasms*. In the example, guest comedian Alix Fox uses humour to describe her difficult relationship with the female orgasm:

I didn't have an orgasm for six years. It wasn't the *first* six years...of my life [laughter]...I first started having sex at 18, and then I carried on having sex, endemically [laughter] and then, it wasn't until I was 24 that I had an orgasm...I didn't understand what the female orgasm was, or how it worked...(Fox, 2017 [online]).

This story – a story that could so easily be characterised by sadness and frustration – is transformed by the presence of jokes, which cause laughter, alleviating tension and creating pleasurable moments of surprise. For example, Fox follows the serious statement – "I didn't have an orgasm for 6 years" – with the unexpected caveat that it "wasn't the *first* six years" of her life, connecting two incongruous (and delightfully inappropriate) ideas: small children and the female orgasm. She then uses the adverb "endemically" to describe the way that she continued to have sex as a young woman, once again bringing together two contradictory and taboo concepts: a young woman's libido and the spread of contagious disease.

Now, I could dip into a number of humour theories here in order to analyse why these lines are funny. But I am much more interested in what the funny materials in each episode of *The Guilty Feminist* – which the above example is characteristic of – do. The jokes, and moments of laughter can be seen, I think, as eventful moments of "shock" (Massumi, 2013:5), causing a change in focus, or a distancing from the subject matter being discussed. As Massumi points out, "affective expressions like anger and laughter are perhaps the most powerful because they interrupt a situation" (Massumi, 2003:216). They interrupt the flow of meaning that is taking place, the normalised interrelations and interactions that are happening:

Anger, for example, forces the situation to attention, it forces a pause filled with an intensity that is often too extreme to be expressed in words. Anger often degenerates into noise and inarticulate gestures. This forces the situation to rearrange itself around that interruption, and to deal with the intensity in one way or another. In that sense it's brought something positive out – a reconfiguration (ibid).

So, as well as acknowledging the importance of negative affects and the ways these can – and do – act upon the body, *The Guilty Feminist* interrupts and reconfigures our relation to the present moment through humour. Alix Fox, for example, ends her anecdote by recounting how she eventually went to an Ann Summers store, bought a vibrator and booked "TWO DAYS off work" (another statement that is received with lots of laughter by the audience). This is not the story of a feminist killjoy, or of a body stuck in one affective position. This is the story of a fearless, feminist comedian, stepping out of her comfort zone and relating to the world in a new way.

Methodology

Before I move on, I want to include a few words about my methodology. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, my musings on *The Guilty Feminist* form a small part of a much wider research project, in which I have used a number of different methods to explore women-led comedy in the context of the fourth wave. I have facilitated and filmed comedy workshops in Bradford, attended performances by feminist comedians, written field notes and interviewed audience members. I have also performed stand-up comedy myself, once wearing an EDA device to see what I could learn from fluctuations in my body's intensity while on stage. In terms of drawing conclusions, I have taken a diffractive, socio-material approach influenced by Barad (2007), which has allowed me to consider the entangled nature of bodies, spatial arrangements, physical objects and technologies. While I do not have space to elaborate on methodological factors here, it feels important to at least hint at the wider context that this paper sits within.

I started listening to *The Guilty Feminist*, in the first instance, because a number of friends and colleagues had recommended it. For them, it was an efficient way of engaging with feminist ideas and keeping up to date with relevant news stories, and had the added benefit of being funny. I started to listen to the podcast while walking between meetings and engagements in my home city of Manchester, and soon noticed that it had a big impact on my mood. Even when my energy was at its lowest ebb, listening to *The Guilty Feminist* would make me feel lighter on my feet, which often meant – because I tended to listen to it while on the move – that I arrived at my destination feeling better than I had when I set off. In fact, I started carefully timing when I tuned in, saving episodes up so I could give myself an extra energy boost when I needed it most. After learning that other women had experienced similar mood shifts, I started to take the podcast more seriously. I noticed that listening to it left me with a warm glow, the sort of glow I sometimes have after spending time with good friends, leaving me feeling relaxed and confident; ready to take on the world. I will now argue that this ‘glow’ can be connected to the sounds of laughter.

Good vibrations

Recent research on laughter emphasises its role both as an ancient evolutionary mechanism for regulating intense feelings during play, sort of like a dog’s panting (Scott, 2015 [online]), and as a form of communication, which is, more often than not, about making others feel liked, loved and accepted⁶. The difference between these types of laughter is profound: the involuntary, helpless laughter that you might experience when being tickled, for example, is acoustically very different to the nuanced, voluntary laughter that we all engage in during ordinary conversation. In fact, studies have shown that it is physiologically impossible to ‘fake’ involuntary laughter, due to the huge force with which the diaphragm squeezes air out of the lungs during these laugh episodes. This sort of laughter, which I will return to later, is an affective process that resides in the body which we cannot easily and deliberately access (Provine, 2001:50).

What unites all forms of laughter, however, is the importance of human interaction. Provine has pointed out that you are more than 30 times more likely to laugh when you are with someone else than when you are on your own; and, according to Scott, this social laughter usually serves to communicate positive messages to those around us. Of course, laughter can be malicious – an idea that was emphasised by Hobbes⁷ in the 17th century – but, more often than not, we laugh to show that we understand, that we agree, that we are part of the same group as and that we have loving feelings towards those we are laughing with (Scott, 2015 [online]). While there is absolutely no evidence that laughter evolved to make us feel good or improve our health (any more than there is evidence that walking evolved to promote cardiovascular fitness), the secondary benefits of this social behaviour to our wellbeing are unmistakable. In a study by Newman, laughter was shown to be the best method of reducing transient stress, physical tension and psychophysiological reactivity (Provine, 2001:200), while experiments in the world of psychotherapy have shown that laughter can help us to broach sensitive topics, defuse anger and increase intimacy (Provine, 2001:204). To put it simply, laughter makes us feel good, triggering the release of oxytocin, the hormone associated with human bonding.

This ‘feel-good effect’ is interesting, I think, when you consider the difficult issues that are often being discussed on *The Guilty Feminist*. In an episode entitled *Weinstein Culture*, for example, equality activist, writer and journalist Kristine Ziwick says:

Forget the stereotype of the angry feminist...give me a cheer if you’re all f***ing FURIOUS feminists now!!
[Loud cheering, applause and laughter]. So, we’re all pretty f***ing furious! [Laughter and applause]
(Ziwick, 2017 [online]).

Now, the first thing to point out here is that, while Ziwick’s words are greeted by laughter, they are not *actually* all that funny. Rather than making a joke, she initiates a liturgical battlecry; commanding her audience to ‘cheer’ so that she can make her point about feminist anger in the face of sexual violence. Some of the laughter could be in response to the repetition of the words “f***ing furious”, which are deliciously out of place in the mouth of this respectable writer. But in the main, it seems to me that the laughter that vibrates through the room is an expression of concurrence with what Ziwick is saying, an affirmative sound-bed urging her on.

In other areas of my research, I have developed the concept of ‘supportive laughter’, inspired by the laugh-behaviours of women who have attended my comedy workshops. At a focus group in May 2018, one participant explained that sometimes

“we laugh...to show how much we care for each other...to make people feel safe”, while another participant compared laughter with “the water in Aqua Aerobics...it lets you do things you wouldn’t normally do, when you’re not in the water”. The presence of this sort of laughter⁸ makes *The Guilty Feminist* feel very different to other political platforms which might be engaging with similar topics, but coming at them from a different angle.

Prudence Chamberlain describes affect as “moving, transferred between subjects, and emotionally impactful” (Chamberlain, 2017:77). As we can see here, laughter is also always in motion; flowing between bodies; causing those bodies to behave differently. Not only do the bodies become energised, shaking, panting and shouting with intensity, but they become more relaxed, freer with their words and emotions. Ziwica is not a comedian, but because the podcast is set up in a way that promotes laughter – with a live audience, microphones and a range of comic materials provided by Frances-White and her co-host (both of whom are comedians) – she uses the sort of language that she wouldn’t be able to get away with in other, more formal settings, and addresses the audience in the style of a stand-up comedian, asking direct questions and leaving pauses where they are invited to participate. Her words and gestures flow into the audience, and their laughter, applause and other appreciative vocalisations flow back towards her from the other direction. When the audience laughs, Ziwica’s voice becomes louder. In turn, the audience’s laughter surges and swells, punctuating her speech with positive vibrations. Interestingly, the tone of the conversation that follows is extremely intimate and candid, with Ziwica sharing her personal thoughts and feelings about the future of feminism:

In addition to being a chartered feminist I also occasionally moonlight as a semi-optimist [laughter]...and I just think the context has changed...I think this has gone beyond just ‘throwing one to the wolves’...I have to believe that, after having worked [in feminist contexts] in one way or another, for so bloody long...I really do think there’s been a fundamental change (Ziwica, 2017 [online]).

While Ziwica does not encourage the audience to laugh at the Harvey Weinstein case – which could risk diminishing its importance – she does encourage them to laugh throughout the discussion, inviting the audience to quite literally ‘shake off’ the feelings of stress and frustration that can so often cause the body to close down in the face of such painful subjects. Through laughter, the audience occupies a new affective position: one that is about *doing* and *feeling* rather than *coping* and *suppressing*. Their laughter becomes a joyful expression of collective strength and unity, an amplified version of the joy Tarana Burke wanted to achieve through the Me Too movement.

The podcast is recorded all over the world, which means that each week, you are able to listen to the laughter of women from a different place. There is also an impressively diverse array of voices featured on the podcast, from Syrian refugees, to teenage activists, to Chinese tech experts. I mention this because the community united by the laughter in the podcast is global and intersectional. The affects that stream through my earphones are ways of *connecting*, to others and to other situations. As Massumi points out, “with intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embedded-ness in a larger field of life – a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places” (Massumi, 2003:214). When I hear the sounds of other women laughing in support of feminist ideals, those ideals immediately seem more attainable, more important. I feel as though I am participating in a process that is much larger than myself. I feel the tinglings of hope. No wonder this puts me in a good mood.

Chain reactions

In *Chaosmosis*, Guattari redefines subjectivity as “plural and polyphonic” (Guattari, 1995:1). He points out that, in certain social contexts, subjectivity is individualised, with subjects situating themselves in a relation to the Other that is governed by things like familial habits and local customs. In other conditions, however, subjectivity can become collective, by which he means it is:

A multiplicity that deploys itself as beyond the individual, on the side of the socius and preverbal intensities...a logic of affects rather than a logic of reified social structures (Guattari, 1995:5).

I would like to argue here that podcasts like *The Guilty Feminist* can act as vectors of subjectivation for listeners, loosening their relationship to reified social structures and opening up the potential for new ways of being. Of course, as is pointed out by

Guattari, all technological machines have some sort of entanglement with human thought (Guattari, 1995:35). However, because of the huge impact that laughter has on our bodies – and on our conception of ourselves as part of a group – I think there is something about this type of feminist comedy podcast that makes it especially attuned to the opening up of fresh perspectives.

It is well known that laughter is a highly contagious social behaviour, and, as is demonstrated by the clumsy laugh tracks that were attached to the nation's favourite comedy television programmes in the latter half of the 20th century, it can move across an electronic interface, producing an immediate and involuntary chain reaction that does not rely on bodies being physically close to one another. According to Provine, this category of laughter:

...strips away our veneer of culture and language...challeng[ing] the shaky hypothesis that we are rational creatures in full control of our conscious behaviour (Provine, 2001:129).

I have experienced the effects of contagious laughter a number of times while listening to *The Guilty Feminist*, my body surrendering to an array of small, leaky explosions when walking through the city. While this can be embarrassing, there can also be a thrilling quality to the experience. For many women, laughing in itself is a transgressive act (Gray, 1994), never mind laughing alone in a public setting, which carries connotations of recklessness and mental instability. However, in my experience, it is only when the pressure building beneath my diaphragm can no longer be contained that I start to fear the violation of social norms. Up until that moment, I enjoy surreptitiously allowing my insides to inflate with an energy that seems to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once: the bubbling up of a preverbal intensity that I manage and compress, like a balloonist carefully preparing for take-off.

Returning to *Chaosmosis*, Guattari points out that we are all familiar with the "crossings of subjective thresholds...that plunge us into sadness or indeed, into an ambience of gaiety and excitement" (Guattari, 1995:17). These eventful crossings tend to alter the immediate behaviour of the subject, while at the same time opening them up to new fields of virtuality, described here as:

Incorporeal domains of entities [that] we detect at the same time as produce...which appear to have been always there, from the moment we engender them (Guattari, 1995:17).

Guattari does not write about laughter. However, the contagious laughter I am referring to here is, I think, a good example of this sort of subjective shift. Laughter alters the immediate behaviour of the subject; whose breathing patterns and facial expressions might change, and who may also make a series of involuntary movements and/or noises. Laughter is also – as we have already discussed – a highly social behaviour, capable of making us feel more connected to those around us and opening us up to new ideas. When we are moved to laugh with a group of people, whether they are physically present or not, it is as though our sense of self is pleasantly de-centred. We experience the sudden emergence of a new frame of reference: a nascent collective subjectivity which offers the potential for relating to the world in new ways.

As I write this, I am reminded of listening to an episode entitled *Strengths and Weaknesses* while walking along Market Street one of Manchester's busiest shopping areas. In this episode, Frances-White discusses ways of dealing with unwanted attention in public spaces, and shares this personal story:

In the street...this man grabbed my necklace, I think as a game, flirtation thing? To lure me in. But we weren't, like, chatting in a bar. I was walking down the street! [laughter]...I was SO shocked, but I never like to be hostile and cause a fight, 'cause I fear I'll not win it...My instinct is to go into infomercial mode [laughter]; so businesslike and really high status...I put my arms across my chest and shouted 'NOT COOL!!!' at him, and it did, it did stop him [loud laughter and applause]...There is some evidence that this works, that men don't like to be told they're 'not cool' [loud laughter and applause] (Frances-White, 2017 [online]).

It is difficult to capture in writing just how funny Frances-White manages to make this story. It is something about the way she shifts her tone; from hesitant to confident to outraged on the line "We weren't, like, chatting in a bar. I was walking down the street!", which sets in motion a wave of laughter in the audience. It is also the way she shouts "NOT COOL!!!" into her microphone; a sudden increase in volume that is surprising both in its loudness and in its simplicity as a response to such outrageous behaviour.

As I listened to the story, laughter burst out of me. This is a perfect example of the involuntary, affective laughter that Provine writes about: an intensity that cracks the body open, eventfully shattering the present moment. Of course, as soon as the split-second eruption of laughter was over, I became highly aware of my environment, the busy street that had momentarily faded into the background rushed back into focus, and I walked away from the site of my embarrassing transgression as quickly as possible. However, the momentum of the event stayed with me for some minutes. While working hard to maintain a composed exterior, I inwardly celebrated Frances-White's achievement. I imagined – over and over again – shouting “NOT COOL!!” at men whose behaviour I disagreed with, mapping this onto past and future experiences of harassment.

The concept of milieu, which means both ‘middle’ and ‘surroundings’ in French, may be useful here. In her book, *Always More Than One*, Manning uses the term to challenge the idea that an individual is separate from the world around them:

We do not populate, extend into or embody space – instead, we form it (Manning, 2012:15).

This idea is particularly compelling when you consider a woman – like me – walking through a city. As we know from the work of enthographers such as Lauren Elkin, the urban landscape is never neutral or passive (Elkin, 2016:unpag), especially for women, who are told repeatedly from childhood by parents, school, the media and other influential sources that it is unsafe for them to be in certain places at certain times. However, if our material relationship with the world is a “field activated by the event in-forming” (Manning 2013:26); or, a middle that wraps itself around the body, like a self surround, then it is possible to change this relationship to public space.

For example, when I listen to the podcast, I exist at an intersection, on the one hand relating to the narrative content of the episode, while on the other maintaining a lateral awareness of events taking place around me (if I am walking, for example, I will be aware of cars on the road, people walking past me, the weather, etc). I also experience a world of phantasms and daydreams associated with the sounds of the podcast, interwoven with the ebb and flow of memories and emotions as I walk through the city. The urban sphere holds the possibilities for multiple events that might foreground or background experiences of danger, of ‘being looked at’, feelings of shame, excitement and liberation, all working as feelings forming, not yet ‘landed’ and never complete. Through laughter, the podcast creates “an incipient reaching-towards...not of the subject, but of experience itself” (ibid.), affecting the body's capacity to think and move. In my example above, far from feeling isolated or fearful on the street of busy shoppers, I felt as though I was protected by an invisible forcefield, or by an affiliation with a powerful subculture. Reinforced by the act of laughing with a large group of people from all over the world, my subjective position – and therefore my relationship with my city – had changed.

Activism

In *Moments of Excess*, Andrew X argues that our understanding of activism “is based upon the misconception that it is only activists who do social change” (Andrew X, 1999:unpag), which discounts those people that do not consider themselves to be ‘activists’ or ‘political’, but who nevertheless perform behaviours of resistance in their everyday lives. This attitude is – of course – bound up with capitalism, where the more labour and time an act takes up, the more valuable it is deemed to be. It is also bound up with arguments around quantitative and qualitative change: an activist group with clear goals which goes on to achieve policy change is rated more highly than a collection of individuals attempting, in a haphazard fashion, to alter their experience of the everyday.

Taking this into consideration, it is not surprising that defenders of the fourth wave argue vehemently against words like ‘slacktivism’ and ‘clicktivism’, which have been used to poke fun at the movement's reliance on technology. Cochrane, for example, insists that the fourth wave's use of the internet does not denote a ‘lesser’ form of activism, claiming that:

It is increasingly false to draw a line between what happens online and offline – those in their teens don't remember a time before the internet, and understand it as just another part of public, social space (Cochrane, 2013:11).

While I agree that it is important to celebrate the work of those that have participated in recognisable online feminist activity in recent years, and argue that this activity should be valued on the same terms as political campaigns that have not taken place

online, I also wonder if we need to go a little further than Cochrane, moving past a reactive defence of the fourth wave's use of technology and towards a reimagining of contemporary liberatory politics. If we understand social movements as the moving of social relations, it no longer makes sense to talk of static boundaries or limits. The patriarchy is not a *thing out there* that we can fight against, even though we sometimes talk about it as though it was, and a qualitative change to our lives will not necessarily occur through behaviours that can be quantified. Instead, we need to look at forms of activism that create a qualitative change, harnessing and channeling the feelings that make us more able to struggle against oppression and exploitation in our everyday lives.

For example, when compared to quantifiable feminist campaigns, such as Me Too, podcasts like *The Guilty Feminist* do not stand up as particularly good examples of online activism. While they often do raise the profile of other feminist activities (Frances-White often 'interrupts' podcast episodes with short news bulletins containing information about marches and demonstrations, online petitions, charities and volunteering opportunities), the act of listening does not in itself contribute to the forging of 'real world change'. However, because podcasts tend to be listened to while other everyday activities are taking place, disrupting the listener's experience of the everyday, I would argue that they have the potential to elicit a myriad of micro-rebellions, causing a qualitative shift that could be just as powerful.

Laughter, which I have emphasised throughout this paper, is like a conduit for this qualitative change, intensifying the body and unearthing the potentiality in the event. Here I would like to return briefly to my description of my experience with contagious laughter, which seemed to generate – for me at least – a forceful new engagement with politics and public space. Not only did the contagious laughter I described affect my body in the moment, changing the way I moved through the space around me, it also changed how I responded to an incident of harassment about a month later. While in a bar near my home, I found myself confronting a man that had spoken to me inappropriately. This is not something that, I'm ashamed to say⁹, I would normally have done. But in the split second when I could have walked away, I felt myself connected to a global community of feminists. The story from the podcast floated towards me through time and, instead of walking away feeling ashamed, I turned, looked the man that had spoken to me in the eye and said: "Not Cool".

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write that the moving of feelings from interiority to exteriority propels the subject into movement within a wider body politic. This kind of externalising lends the body "an incredible velocity, a catapulting force" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987:356). It is as though the affective experience of listening to the podcast on that day in November set my body in motion, and that the momentum of this change was still unlocking new ways of becoming in and with the world a month after the original event.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined how *The Guilty Feminist's* use of humour might be capable of distancing listeners from the negative affects that can get 'stuck' to femininity and feminism, edging them towards a more joyful and hopeful politics. I have also highlighted the similarities between affect and laughter, exploring how sounds from the podcast can change the way we relate to feminist issues, which allows us to 'shake off' the feelings of stress and frustration that can so often cause the body to close down in the face of painful subjects. Using Guattari's ideas on the production of subjectivation, and hinting at Manning's work on the milieu, I have argued that the podcast can alter our experience of the everyday, increasing the body's capacity to affect and be affected, and opening up the emergence of new ways of thinking, feeling and being. Finally, I have considered how this podcast and others like it might be operating within the fourth wave feminist movement, and have argued in favour of a reimagining of podcasts such as *The Guilty Feminist* as a burgeoning form of online activism. As discussed, online movements such as Me Too are already positioned as a 'lower' form of activism. Podcasts are even further down the slacktivist food chain; the absence of literature on feminism and podcasting is testimony to this fact. However, if we think about the fourth wave as being characterised by joy – or 'active unhappiness' – then *The Guilty Feminist* is clearly one of the ways technology is being used to reinvigorate our affective relationship with the world.

Why is the medium of the podcast important? Well, in *Chaosmosis*, Guattari argues that technology is capable of creating a world that is "more collective, more social, more political" (Guattari, 1987:29). I believe that *The Guilty Feminist* is an example of exactly this, a form of technology being used to forge a new social movement: one that is constituted through a logic of affects,

laughter and a more joyful engagement with politics. Also, as I have pointed out, podcasts can be listened to anywhere, so it is much more likely that women will engage with them in the public sphere. Whereas other forms of online activism might give an intense experience to participants, these intensities can dissipate quickly, as social media is often accessed in isolation from others. Also, as Paasonen points out, social media can unleash a host of negative affects, which shut down the body rather than increasing its capacity to act (Paasonen et al, 2018:5). However, as I have described through my own experiences of listening to *The Guilty Feminist*, podcasts bleed into everyday life and can radically change the way that someone like me responds to patriarchal social relations. As my body becomes intense, there is an immediate change in the potentialities of my relationship to the city. Laughter directly interrupts my relationship with my environment, offering – to use Guattarian terms – the potential for reterritorialising my subjectivity and connecting me to a radical global movement of noisy, joyful women. Just as images from Tiananmen Square unleashed a ‘revolution of feeling’, creating new constellations of universes in which people might partake in micro-rebellions in their everyday lives, the sounds of the podcast elicit affective responses that go beyond specific feminist goals, opening up a nascent collective identity and the potential for altering your response to social relationships.

Interestingly, framing podcasts in this way goes against dominant modes of thinking about technology. Bennett, for example, describes the myth of modernity as disenchanted; “a place of dearth and alienation...when compared to a golden age of community and...coherency” (Bennett, 2001:3). This myth would place someone walking through the city listening to a podcast as an isolated figure, their earphones getting in the way of their affective attachment to the world. However, as I have hopefully shown through this paper, there is also another way of looking at this. Podcasts, particularly recordings that use the sound of laughter, can work against feelings of alienation, helping us to feel connected to a large community of people with a similar outlook. Because of the way laughter affects our sensory disposition, they can also offer a feeling of fullness, plenitude and liveliness, which can provoke new ideas, perspectives and identities. As pointed out by Frances-White:

It’s the sound of the audience...[that bolsters listeners’ ability to act]...they feel like they have a tribe... they] feel the weight of the [Guilty Feminist] army” (Frances-White, Deborah, 2017 [online]).

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Endnotes

- 1 *The Guilty Feminist* was shortlisted for an Internet Award in the 2017 Chortle Awards, and nominated for Best Podcast in the 2017 Audio & Radio Industry Awards (Chortle, 2017 [online]) & (Radio Today, 2017 [online]).
- 2 I am currently in the final stages of writing my PhD thesis at Manchester Metropolitan University. The working title of the thesis is: *A new material feminist study of women-led comedy as a site for gender disruption within fourth wave feminisms*.
- 3 For an authoritative account of the different waves, see Baumgardner's *F'em: Goo Goo, Gaga and Some Thoughts on Balls* (2011)
- 4 This is just one of a very large number of online feminist movements that have taken place since 2008. In *All the Rebel Women: The rise of the fourth wave of feminism* (2013), Cochrane gives a comprehensive account of feminist online movements between 2008-2013.
- 5 Other examples are *Throwing Shade*, described as "the perfect combination of silly, intelligent, cynical and charming" by Entertainment Weekly (Player.FM, 2018 [online]) and *Two Dope Queens*, which spent over a week at number one in the iTunes download charts after its release in 2016 (Baker, 2016 [online]).
- 6 Incidentally, laughter is a social signal that women make almost twice as often as men (Scott, 2015 [online]).
- 7 Given that his position in *Leviathan* was that humanity is engaged in a constant struggle for power, it is perhaps unsurprising that Hobbes theorised laughter as a "sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by companion with the infirmity in others" (Hobbes, 1928:13).
- 8 Because laughter is such a complex behaviour, transcripts that contain it are often ambiguous. Therefore, you will have to take my word for it that the laughter here was positive and supportive, rather than ironical or teasing.
- 9 There's that feminist guilt again!